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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on the use of children's literature in adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction. Because high quality children's literature is characterized by an economy of words, stunning illustrations, captivating and quickly moving plots, and universal themes, carefully chosen books can offer educational benefits for adult ESL learners. Separate sections of the digest highlight the following: book selection criteria, literature-based teaching strategies, and extension activities. Also included is an annotated book list for five English proficiency levels. (Author/JL)

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Using Multicultural Children's Literature in Adult ESL Classes

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Researchers and practitioners have documented the importance of children's literature in elementary and middle schools for developing language and literacy skills and content knowledge (Rudman, 1993; Smallwood, 1996). Because high quality children's literature is characterized by economy of words, stunning illustrations, captivating but quickly moving plots, and universal themes, carefully chosen books can offer educational benefits for adult English language learners as well as for children. In addition, multicultural books honor diversity among writers and artists, give literary voice to underrepresented groups, and stimulate cross-cultural appreciation. This digest provides book selection criteria, literature-based teaching strategies, and an annotated book list for five English proficiency levels.

Book Selection Criteria for the Adult ESL Classroom.

Picture books are particularly useful in adult ESL classes because they provide clear and interesting illustrations along with the reading text. Their length (typically around 30 pages) allows them to be read in one class period. Selection is critical, as not all books are equally successful with English learners, and those appropriate for adults learning English form an even smaller subset. Teachers should use the following questions as a guide to evaluate a book's appropriateness for adult learners.

- Does it relate to your curricular objectives? These can include a focus on social, cultural, or political topics; life skills; thematic vocabulary; or grammatical structures.
- Does it feature adults? Does it have some adult protagonists, address mature themes, or convey universal messages?
- Are there clear illustrations that help tell the story?
- Does it contain repeated, predictable language patterns? Language patterns can include rhyming as well as repetition of words, refrains, or entire sentences.
- Does it use language that is slightly beyond the level of the learners? Both the amount of text and the level of syntactic complexity should be considered.
- Is there authentic cultural content?

Teaching Strategies

The reading process can be divided into three stages (before, during, and after the reading) that can easily fit into a 45-minute period.

Before/Prereading. The teacher may need to first explain and justify the use of children's books. The story is then briefly introduced, key vocabulary is previewed, and some key illustrations or characters may be highlighted. Learners are invited to predict the story from the cover and other clues. The teacher poses specific listening tasks, such as identifying a particular theme or the use of specific structures. These motivational strategies involve learners in the book and help connect it to other experiences, literary or real-life.

During/Reading aloud. The way to engage a class in a book is to read it aloud with expression. The teacher can also use the following strategies: move slowly around the room; take time to show the pictures; modify the language of the text as needed to facilitate comprehension; and pause occasionally for dramatic effect, to highlight new words or concepts, or to check for comprehension.

After/Discussion and Review. At the completion of the oral reading, the teacher should allow ample time for reflection and discussion. To encourage spontaneous reactions ask, "What do you think?" or pose more specific questions to focus the discussion. It is also important to discuss the theme or structures identified in the prereading stage. An oral comprehension check can serve as a review of the story and as an informal assessment.

To build the reading-writing connection, students can record their reflections in a journal. They can copy the title, author, and date at the top of the page and then write briefly about their favorite part, how the story made them feel, something they learned from the story, or a similar incident that happened to them. They can share these reflections orally, as appropriate.

Extension Activities

Learner-centered literacy activities, from round robin story telling, to rewriting book endings, to composing stories stimulated by the book, can follow the initial reading (Smallwood, 1991; Tomlinson & McGraw, 1997). For example, with *26 Letters and 99 Cents* (Hoban, 1987), a basic literacy class can practice sound/letter associations (phonics) in student-made concentration games. After reading *A Flag for My Country* (Spenser, 1993), a low-intermediate class can sequence the story with sentence strips and play Bingo using past tense verbs from the book. A high-intermediate class that has read *Fly Away Home* (Bunting, 1991), a story about a boy and his father who are homeless and living in an airport, might rewrite the story from the father's perspective and then discuss or role play the various conflicts in the story.

Conclusion

Multicultural children's literature can be effectively integrated into family literacy and adult ESL programs to develop English language oral proficiency, literacy, and content skills and to build cross-generational collaboration and appreciation of other cultures. Nonfiction picture books that are presented in a mature style can provide factual information and valuable curricular material. Stories with themes of intergenerational conflict, emigration, and immigration will interest adult learners who can also share them with their children.

Recommended Books for Adult ESL Classes

This book list was developed from the six selection criteria for adult learners described above. To help teachers effectively integrate literature in their classrooms, an English proficiency level

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was identified for each book, based on grammatical structures in the California standards for adult ESL education programs (California Department of Education, 1992). The proficiency levels also reflect the amount of text per page, overall complexity of language and vocabulary, and level of the story's concreteness (*vs.* abstractness). These levels are meant to guide teachers, not limit them; therefore, teachers are encouraged to try any of these books with any group of students, editing, simplifying, or amplifying as needed.

Literacy Level

Hoban, T. (1987). *26 letters and 99 cents*. New York: Greenwillow Books. This book is useful for basic literacy focusing on numbers and money, letters, and pictures. Its large, clear pictures suggest many teaching applications. See also other basic concept books by the author (e.g., *I Read Signs*, 1983).

Hoban, T. (1997). *Construction zone*. New York: Greenwillow Books. This book is simple and clear. There is a picture of one piece of construction machinery and one word per two-page spread. More vocabulary for construction workers is provided at the back of the book.

Pomeroy, D. (1996). *One potato. A counting book of potato prints*. New York: Harcourt Brace. Each number (1-10, 20, 30, etc.) is associated with attractive food, and each two-page spread is illustrated by an appetizing potato print.

Siddals, M. K. (1997). *Tell me a season*. Illustrated by P. Mathers. The vocabulary of seasons, colors, and nouns from nature comprises the minimal text in this simple book. This book can also be used to introduce adjectives.

Beginning Level

Linden, A.M. (1992). *One smiling grandma. A Caribbean counting book*. Illustrated by L. Russell. New York: Dial. This is an intergenerational story that would suit a family literacy class.

Low, W. (1997). *Chinatown*. New York: Henry Holt. Simple sentences and descriptive illustrations capture daily life in New York's Chinatown. Celebration of Chinese New Year is highlighted. The author/artist is from Chinatown.

Miranda, A. (1997). *To market, to market*. Illustrated by J. Stevens. New York: Harcourt Brace. This adult spoof on the classic children's nursery rhyme has a repeated refrain, rhyming words, and food and animal vocabulary.

Morris, A. (1992). *Houses and homes*. Photographs by K. Heyman. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard. Stunning, color photographs and limited text present homes around the world. See also *Bread, bread, bread* (1989), by the same author, photographer, and publisher, done with the same mature style and multicultural approach.

Low-Intermediate Level

Cox, J. (1998). *Now we can have a wedding*. Illustrated by D. DiSalvo-Ryan. New York: Holiday House. An inter-ethnic wedding is planned, and friends and fellow tenants in their apartment building prepare food from around the world for the celebration.

Garland, S. (1993). *The lotus seed*. Illustrated by T. Kiuchi. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. A single lotus seed provides continuity for a Vietnamese family. The granddaughter tells her grandmother's emotional and traumatic story in one to two sentences per page in a semi-poetic format. Some challenging language and vocabulary is included.

Garza, C.L. (1996). *In my family/En mi familia*. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press. These authentic vignettes of family life in south Texas, by the author and illustrator, a famous Mexican-American artist, are simply written, with one topic per page. This is the sequel to *Family pictures* (1989), by the same author and publisher.

Sakai, K. (1990). *Sachiko means happiness*. Illustrated by T. Arai. Emeryville, CA: Children's Book Press. In this Japanese family, roles change, as the grandmother begins to lose her memory and her granddaughter learns to accept her as she now is.

Say, A. (1993). *Grandfather's journey*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. This story is about the author's grandfather, who journeyed between his two cultures—Japanese and American. The sparse text has some challenging vocabulary and syntax.

Spenser, E. (1993). *A flag for our country*. New York: Steck-Vaughn. This simply told story of Betsy Ross and the making of the American flag has some difficult grammatical patterns. It is good for citizenship and American history classes.

High-Intermediate Level

Bartone, E. (1996). *American too*. Illustrated by T. Lewin. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard. An Italian-American adolescent girl bridges two cultures. New York City in the early 20th century comes alive with Lewin's artistry. See also *Peppe the lamplighter* (1993), by the same author and publisher, about an Italian-American boy who proudly works in a menial job to help his family.

Bresnick-Perry, R. (1992). *Leaving for America*. Illustrated by M. Reisberg. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press. Based on a true story, this Russian-Jewish immigration saga highlights the trauma of leaving home. The intergenerational story has a detailed story line and some complex sentence patterns.

Bunting, E. (1991). *Fly away home*. Illustrated by R. Himler. New York: Clarion Books. This story about homelessness has some grammatical complexity. See also *The wall* (1990), by the same author, illustrator, and publisher, about the Vietnam memorial.

Kurtz, J., & Kurtz, C. (1997). *Only a pigeon*. New York: Simon & Schuster. This journey into the urban life of modern Addis Ababa is told through the eyes of an Ethiopian adolescent boy who works, goes to school, and proudly raises pigeons. The prose is enhanced by realistic, soft watercolor paintings.

Lewin, T. (1997). *Fair! New York*: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard. Lewin's large, colorful and detailed illustrations accompany text about an American cultural experience, the county fair. This book introduces a lot of vocabulary in a number of verb tenses.

Maestro, B. (1996). *Coming to America. The story of immigration*. Illustrated by S. Ryan. New York: Scholastic. This illustrated history of immigration is historically accurate, yet simplified for a picture book format. It provides additional information at the end of the book (e.g., a table of dates).

Orr, K. (1990). *My grandpa and the sea*. Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books. The wisdom of a simple fisherman is honored in this story, set on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia. The intergenerational conflict lends itself to class discussion.

Advanced Level

Ashabranner, B. (1993). *Still a nation of immigrants*. Photographs by J. Ashabranner. New York: Cobblehill/Dutton. This 125-page book explores the issues of immigration today. It is divided into chapters and also smaller subsections, so a teacher can easily select a 3-5-page passage for classroom use. It highlights successful immigrants from a range of cultures. Black and white photographs enhance the text.

Nye, N. S. (1996). *The same sky. A collection of poems from around the world*. New York: Alladin. This selection of short, original poems was written by children and adults from all over the world. It is organized into topics (e.g., families, dreams, and dreamers). Marketed as a children's book, the poetry has appeal for all ages.

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